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Authority of the Father: Eternal functional subordination – *Quo Vadis?*

ABSTRACT

This article aims to provide the reader with a short introduction on, and overview of the movement called Eternal Functional Subordination (EFS)¹ that was introduced in 1977 by a Presbyterian preacher, George Knight. This is mostly an evangelical movement and is generally concerned with the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, which is regarded as an eternal authoritative position of the Father, and an eternal subordination of the Son – against the mainline Protestant churches. EFS claims that the roots of this view go back to the Bible and the tradition of the early church, referring to the Creeds and the Councils, including the Church Fathers. Are they correct with this statement? A critical discussion of EFS follows the introduction and concise literature overview.

1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the fundamental doctrines of theology, the accepted and safe option is to “go with the flow”. This “flow” is, quite rightly, determined by people who view themselves or are regarded as

- 1 Both the EFS and African theology refer to the subordination of the Son (see Mbiti 1970; 1975; 1998; Han & Beyers 2017). As African theology does not form part of the EFS movement, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this. The notion of perichoresis, which is important with reference to the Trinity, and a subject of intense discussion in contemporary scholarship, is also not discussed in this article, as it is outside the scope of this article (see e.g. Sansom 2021).



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authorities on the interpretation of the message or contents of the Bible. In ancient days, if someone stood up against this “flow”, s/he was mostly labelled a heretic, like Arius, Donatism, and so on.² One such fundamental doctrine held by the Christian faith was and still is the Trinity doctrine (see Parker 2018:1). However, this is also one of the most complicated doctrines when one wants to reach a solid biblical understanding thereof. In the Old Testament, we hear the words of the *Shema: Hear, o Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one* (Deut. 6:4). In the New Testament, during and after the incarnation of Jesus, the early church realised (had to realise?) that this ONE GOD “always” comprised three Persons – the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. However, in the Old Testament books, there is no real, concrete, or intended proof of their existence. Would somebody in the Old Testament era understand the term “Spirit of God” as a Person separated/distinct from Yahweh, or would they interpret specific terms in the Old Testament as a reference to Jesus or God’s Son?³ (See Van Ruler 1969:162.)

The *people of the way* (Ac 9:2) – the first reference to the first Christians – “inherited” Yahweh and monotheism from the Jewish religion from which they descended. However, they had to incorporate Jesus into this monotheistic concept,⁴ as the angel Gabriel already announced to Mary that Jesus would be the “Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32), and the “Son of God” (Luke 1:35). When Jesus was on earth, he was acknowledged as the Son of God (mostly and significantly by the devil and his demons – Luke 4 and 8), while he referred to Yahweh as his Father (Matt. 7:21). In addition, Jesus as the first παράκλητος (1 John 2:1) promised his followers that, after his ascension to heaven, he would send “another” Paraclete – ἄλλος παράκλητος – the Holy Spirit (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7) to his followers. The Old Testament Yahweh has become, or always was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Subsequent to Jesus’ crucifixion and ascension, different views developed on this newly founded religion, and the church of the time had to decide what was right and what was wrong. In the 4th century, Arius, for example, in his *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia* 4-5 argued that Jesus was God, but not on the level of the Father (Parmentier 1954:26). He was rather created by the

2 We must, however, bear in mind that these “heretics” (mostly) were also “committed Christians” (Oliver & Oliver 2018:3), but they interpreted the word of God differently. This is still the case nowadays.

3 There are references to the Messiah in the Old Testament (Isa. 7:14 and 53), but without using the term “Messiah”. These are, in fact, passages referred to in the New Testament, specifically the Gospel according to Matthew. Already in Matthew 1:1, Jesus is referred to as “Messiah”. Jansen (2009:550) states that “[o]nly in the dispensation according to the flesh, [these] new and later names of Jesus became appropriate”.

4 Fredrickson (1998:260) refers to this as a “theology which struggle[d] to become truly trinitarian”.

Father – the highest of the creatures – and could be called a god, but not *the* God.⁵ At the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, Arianism was rejected (St. Michael's Depot [s.a.]).⁶ The Council decided that Jesus was the Son of God, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ (*of the same nature/substance as the Father*)⁷ [Early Church Texts s.a.], fully God just like the Father. After 451 CE (the Council of Chalcedon),

the official position of the church became that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all divine and are divine in the same sense and to the same degree as one another (Erickson 2009:16).

Through the centuries, the policy of the church, based on the three Creeds, was that there is only one God, with three Persons forming the Trinity. According to the Nicene Creed (325), they are “of one substance” – in this instance, referring to the Father and the Son – with the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; the Chalcedonian Creed (451) refers to Jesus as “consubstantial with the Father”. According to the Athanasian Creed [s.a.], there is

one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance ... the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal ... the whole three Persons are co-eternal together and co-equal.

During the late 20th century,⁸ a group of scholars started yet another debate on the Trinity, mainly called “eternal functional subordination” (EFS). The main proponents of the current debate are the American theologians Grudem and Ware. According to Grudem, EFS affirms the full deity of Jesus (the Son), who was eternally “begotten of the Father before all worlds” (see Nicene Creed 325). He understands the term “begotten of the Father” as referring to an “eternal Father-Son relationship in the Trinity that includes no superiority or inferiority of being or essence” (Grudem 2016). This is still in agreement with the belief system of the mainline Protestants of the day. EFS differs from the Protestants on the point of the eternal Father-Son relationship. EFS understands it “in terms of *the eternal authority of the Father and the eternal submission of the Son within their relationship*” (Grudem 2016; original emphasis).

5 In an extensive argument, Giles (2006:306-309) links EFS to Arianism, stating that EFS tends towards the heresy of Arius, thus to be a heresy.

6 See the Letter of the Synod in Nicaea to the Egyptians (church in Alexandria) paragraph 3.

7 It can also be translated with consubstantial, or of one essence with the Father.

8 When jumping to the late 20th century, we are in fact skipping a number of movements/views such as those of the Socinians (later known as the Unitarians – see Erickson 2009:16) as well as the liberal theology of the 19th and 20th century, which “degraded” Jesus in one way or the other (see Erickson 2009:17).

This movement has many names, of which the general name is “eternal functional subordination” (EFS). It is sometimes referred to as “eternal subordination/submission of the Son” (ESS). It is also called “neo-subordinationism”⁹ (see Tinkham 2017; 2018); “economic subordination” (Grudem 1994:251); “eternal relations of authority-submission” (ERAS) (Graham 2019), and “eternal relational subordination” (see Doyle 2004). These terms are not totally synonymic, although they refer to the same movement or different tributaries within the movement. According to Tinkham (2018), EFS’ popularity is growing rapidly, especially within evangelical circles. To understand EFS better, the views of some of the main proponents are given below.

2. EFS – A SELECTED LITERATURE OVERVIEW¹⁰

In 1977, Knight introduced EFS in his book, *New Testament teaching on the role and relationship of men and women*¹¹ (see Mullins 2021). He refers to a “chain of subordination” and of an eternal subordination of the Son regarding role and authority, although both of them are fully divine (Knight 1977:56).

However, already in the 19th century, Hodge ([1871] 2005:349) stated that the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father “concerns the mode of subsistence and operation”, but not that of essence. He adds that the Son is of the Father, while the Holy Spirit is of the Father and the Son. The Father acts through the Son, while the Father and the Son act through the Holy Spirit. Hodge ([1871] 2005:344, 402) points to a functional order (*taxis*) relating to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit:

There is a subordination of the Persons as to the mode of subsistence and operation [while they are the] same in substance, [and] equal in power and glory.

However, subordination is no indication of inferiority, as it “only concerns the mode of subsistence and operation” (Hodge [1871] 2005:349).

9 Grudem (1994:244) refers to subordinationism as a heretical concept which holds that the Son is inferior or subordinate in being to the Father.

10 Cognisance is taken of other EFS proponents/supporters referred to by Grudem (2016), namely Strachan, Packer, Henry, Edwards (dating back to 1740!), Vos (dating back to 1896!), Reymond, Ryrie, Lewis, Demarest, Yarnell, Ovey, and Frame. Gons & Naselli (2018) add Carson, Schreiner, Köstenberger, Dahms, Piper, Keller, Bird, and Olson. I also picked up Swain & Allen (2013), Taylor (see Parker 2018:30), Leithart (2017), and Butler (2009).

11 Many EFS proponents link the subordination of the wife to her husband, or even of a woman to a man, to EFS. This falls outside the scope of this article.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Strong emphasised the oneness of essence (οὐσία)¹² in God, described as “an intercommunion of persons and an immanence of one divine person in another”:

The subordination of the *person* of the Son to the *person* of the Father, or in other words an order of personality, office, and operation which permits the Father to be officially first, the Son second, and the Spirit third, is perfectly consistent with equality. Priority is not necessarily superiority (Strong 1907:342; original emphasis).

Berkhof (1953:88-89) emphasised that

[t]here is a certain order in the ontological Trinity ... Generation and procession take place within the Divine Being, and imply a certain subordination as far as the manner of personal subsistence, but no subordination as far as the possession of the divine essence is concerned. This ontological Trinity and its inherent order is (*sic*) the metaphysical basis of the economic Trinity.

Due to the link between the ontological and economic Trinity, each Person has a different task indicated by the *praepositiones dictionales* ἐκ, διὰ, and ἐν, referring to everything that is ἐκ (out of) the Father, διὰ (through) the Son, and ἐν (in) the Spirit. He then ascribes generation only to the Father, filiation only to the Son, and procession only to the Holy Spirit.

Chafer (1993:316) affirms the eternal generation of the Son:

The theological distinction is set forth to the effect that the Son is eternally generated ... Christ is wholly unrelated to created beings, being, as He is, begotten before all created beings ... Christ is by generation and not by creation. He is the Creator of all things. Generation is not predicated of the Father or the Spirit ... It is not the result of any divine act but has ever been from all eternity.

Chafer (1993:316) regards the terms “Father” and “Son” as “anthropomorphic labels” that do not affect the equality within the Trinity. He also refers to an eternal “functional subordination” within the Trinity concerning creation and redemption. Chafer (1993:316) links this to the eternal generation of the Son and “not in any distinction of essential divinity”.

With the turn to the 21st century, Schemm championed the gradation view, with reference to ancient theologians (see Kovach & Schemm 1999; Schemm 2000; 2002).

12 οὐσία refers to the “fundamental reality which makes something what it is” (Arsenal 2016).

It cannot be legitimately denied that the eternal subordination of the Son is an orthodox doctrine and believed from the history of the early church to the present day (Kovach & Schemm 1999:464).

Schemm argues that one finds subordination in the Bible, specifically in John 5:18-19, 6:38, and in 1 Corinthians 15:26-28. Schemm (2005:84) rejects the view that the essence of the Son is inferior to that of the Father (see Parker 2018:30).

Doyle (2004) is a proponent of “eternal relational subordination”, and distinguishes between the terms “immanent Trinity” and “economic Trinity”. The former refers to how God is in himself – within the Trinity – in eternity, while the latter is a reference to the Trinity appearing to us while working in history. It can also be translated (from the Greek term οἰκονομία) as “household management”, a monarchy in which the Son has an obedient (subordinate) role. Each Person of the Trinity has his own role/function/work, without any subordination of his essence (Doyle 2004:n.p.):¹³

For according to the nature of essence they are so joined together that they are one God, and the divine nature is common to the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit.

Horrell (2004) distinguishes between the ontological equality of the Trinity and the difference in roles. He is a supporter of the eternal generation of the Son, and applies it to prove an eternal order (*taxis*) relating to the relationships in the Trinity (Horrell 2007:60-63, 67-78; see Parker 2018:15):

That virtually all Christianity from at least the fifth century has confessed the *eternal generation* of the Son and the *eternal procession* of the Spirit indicates (but does not oblige) an order in the immanent Godhead (Horrell 2007:63; original emphasis).

He also supports the view that one should pray *to the Father, through the Son, and in the power of the Spirit*. Horrell (2007:47-48) refers to the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father as an “eternally ordered social model” of the Trinity, arguing that

the one divine Being eternally exists as three distinct centers of consciousness, wholly equal in nature, genuinely personal in relationships, and each mutually indwelling the other.

He is against an *egalitarian* view of the Trinity,¹⁴ as he opines that it eliminates the distinction between the three Persons – he refers to this as

13 In this instance, Doyle (2004) refers to Athanasius (to be discussed later).

14 This refers to the view of the conventional Protestant movement.

modalism (Horrell 2007:59). For him, there is an eternal equality of essence and an eternal distinction of Persons in the Trinity.

At the 2016 Evangelical Theological Society meeting, Ware and Grudem concurred about eternal generation, and in 2017, together with Erickson, Giles, and Sanders (all three opponents of EFS), they confirmed eternal generation (Erickson *et al.* 2017). However, unlike Sanders, Ware holds that the eternal functions of the Father and the Son are in line with their respective titles (see Parker 2018:4). This causes the Father to have eternal authority over the Son. The Father has the authority, while the Son is the agent who carries out the “ultimate plans” of the Father (see Ware 2008).

Ware (2005:71) provided the most extended treatment of the gradational-authority view of the Trinity, arguing that “[a]n authority-submission structure marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the one who is three”. In this authority-submission structure,¹⁵ the three Persons understand each other’s rightful place. The Father possesses the place of supreme authority, and Jesus is the eternal Son of the eternal Father (Ware 2005:71). As such,

the Son submits to the Father ... [a]nd the Spirit submits to both the Father and the Son ... [a structure that] marks the very nature [of God] (Ware 2005:21).¹⁶

Ware (2005:43) claims that

each member of the Godhead is equally God, each is eternally God, and each is fully God – not three gods but three Persons of the one Godhead.

All of them share the same attribute, namely omnipotence. Ware (2005:78-79) also refers to God’s foreknowledge of Jesus Christ before he created the world (1 Peter 1:18-21).

Although he mentions that the Persons are working together, Ware (2012:29-30) also allocates specific works for every Person, stating that each Person “contributes distinctively to the work of the ‘one God’” (see Parker 2018:28). These works are based on an order (*taxis*) within the Trinity (Ware 2005:46; 2012), pointing out the Father’s supremacy and authority, even over the creation where Jesus reigns as Lord (Ware 2005:50-51). The will of the Father lies behind the creation (Ware 2005:53). Sometimes he uses the Son or even the Spirit to execute his will (Ware 2005:56-57). Ware (2005:18) also indicates that our prayers should acknowledge the roles of the three Persons

¹⁵ Ware prefers “submission” to “subordination” (see Erickson 2009:37).

¹⁶ In this instance, he refers to 1 Peter 1:18-21.

of the Trinity: We should pray “to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit”.¹⁷

According to Ware (2007:159), the church understood and, in fact, supported the EFS of the Son “from the beginning”. He refers to John 6:38 (Jesus came from heaven to do the will of his Father) and 1 Corinthians 15:27-28 (where the Son is said to be made subject to the Father) as the most important verses. He concludes that there is a relation of eternal “authority and submission” between the Father and the Son (Ware 2007:160), adding the Holy Spirit: “[T]he Father wills to send, the Son submits and comes, and the Spirit willingly empowers” (Ware 2007:160).

Ware refers to Augustine of Hippo who, in his doctrinal treatise *On the Holy Trinity* (Schaff 1885a:20), emphasises that there is both an eternal equality of essence and an eternal distinction of Persons in the Trinity. He regards these as the two pillars of Christianity (Ware 2001:8), although it does not refer to EFS.

Grudem and Ware are also depicted as primary proponents of the ERAS view (Graham 2019). Distancing himself from any form of Arianism, Grudem (1994:252) declares that each Person in the Trinity is fully God. However, the difference between the three Persons is on the level of *function* (primary activities – called the *economy* of the Trinity – Grudem 1994:248). He applies this statement to the act of creation (the Father spoke the words and the Son executed) and of redemption (the Father planned it and sent his Son to earth,¹⁸ after which the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit) (Grudem 1994:249). *Commanding* is attributed to the Father, while *obeying* is attributed to the Son (see Grudem 1994:250) – this is called “eternal generation” (Parker 2018:5). For Grudem, the Father and the Son equally share in the divine essence, while the Son has the same characteristics as the Father but still carries out the plans of the Father (see Grudem 1994:248-252; 2012).

Grudem elaborates on the fact that the “egalitarians”, referred to earlier, regard the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as one with the same attributes, being, and essence. As there is no difference between them eternally, we would have to refer to them as Person A, Person A, and Person A (Grudem 1994:433). Grudem (1994:433) argues for a difference in authority in the relationship of the Persons of the Trinity.

17 Unlike EFS, Ware seems to indicate that the Father sometimes makes choices apart from the Son and the Spirit (Ware 2005:59). However, in 2016, he clarified this, stating that the omnipotent Father can do anything that he wants, yet he chooses to “always and only [work] inseparably with the Son and the Spirit” (Wedgeworth 2016).

18 He refers to John 3:16, Galatians 4:4, and Ephesians 1:9-10. For the Son who obeyed, he uses John 6:38 and Hebrews 10:5-7.

Although the Son and the Holy Spirit are “equal in deity to God the Father” (an ontological equality), their roles are subordinate to that of the Father: An ontological equality, but an economic subordination (Grudem 1994:251; 2016). Because God is immutable, this has been and will remain so for eternity (Grudem 1994:251). Although Jesus acts in a specific way, he is not acting independently from his Father’s authority – that action is not identical with, but separable from his Father’s (Grudem 2015:24).

On the question as to whether the Son is economically eternally subordinate to the Father, despite him being equal in essence to the Father, Grudem (1994:248) bases his argument on the “different functions” or “primary activities” of the Trinity. He understands the relation between the Father and the Son as that between a father and a son, with the father in the position of authority and the son as the obedient one (Grudem 1994:249). Parker (2018:6) refers to Grudem who examines ancient Hebrew culture and concludes that the father possessed ultimate authority within the family (see also Bromiley 1979-1988:285), while the children respected him and carried out his will. When it comes to a similarity between a father and a son in both the ancient Hebrew family and the Old and New Testaments, it was more a relationship between the two persons and not a similarity (Parker 2018:7).

Based on the Nicene Creed (325), specifically “begotten of the Father before all worlds”, both Grudem and Ware affirm that the difference between EFS and the “egalitarians” is the eternal Father-Son relationship. They understand it in terms of the “eternal authority of the Father and the eternal submission of the Son within their relationship ... but not in essence or deity” (Grudem 2016).

The “most moderate of the current gradational views” is from Letham (2004:480) who rejects the two terms “hierarchy” and “subordination”, and replaces them with *taxis*, which suggests orderliness or organisation. For Letham (2004:400), the Trinity is more about what is suitable or fitting and not about a hierarchy (gradation or rank):

This inner-Trinitarian order is distinguished by position and not status, by form and not being, by sequence and not power, for they are fully and perfectly equal.

The implication is that the Father comes first, the Son second, and the Holy Spirit third. In line with Strong (1907), Letham (2004:94-97) argues that the Son’s submission to the Father does not imply any subordination or inferiority, but it is an eternal institution.

Following Chafer (1993), Geisler (2003:290) notes an EFS within the Trinity, which is neither temporal nor economic, where each one of them has

a “different function or role [where some functions] are subordinate to others” (see Parker 2018:23-24).

According to Parker, the two terms “eternal generation” and “EFS” are not mutually exclusive. “Eternal generation” is based on the Greek term *μονογενής*, used in the Bible, and has been acknowledged throughout the history of the church. “EFS” also makes biblical sense, as the terms “Father” and “Son” befit their respective titles (see Parker 2018:33). All three Persons are unified in their works, while each of them has a respected role to carry out God’s will. With reference to the works of the Persons of the Trinity, Parker (2018:31) states that they share works such as the creation and mankind’s redemption, but that each of the Persons also has a distinct role and tasks that befit that Person. The Father is the origin of a mission, the Son carries out the mission, while the Spirit empowers the mission. The Persons in the Trinity, therefore, act according to their different titles. This is in line with both Grudem and Ware – the Trinity is equal in essence but differs in roles.

On the topic of the authority of the Father, Parker (2018:26) argues that it is part of the “essential nature of God”, as it is part of his omnipotence – being all-powerful – and it is, therefore, a “fundamental attribute” of the Father. Bromiley (1979-1988:365) refers to the Father as “the only ultimate source of all other authorization and power”. Jesus, as the eternal Son of God, received eternal authority – through his eternal generation – from his Father (see Matt. 28:19). As his Father granted it to him, Jesus’ authority is thus also part of his essential nature (see Bromiley 1979-1988:66). According to Ware (2011:44), both the Father and the Son possess divine essence – not to be distinguished from each other – although with distinct properties. One such distinct property is the Son’s EFS. On the debate on whether this authority “is a property of nature or of relation”, Parker (2018:31) strongly feels that it is based on relationship, as the Father has given *all authority* to his Son (Matt. 28:18), be it on the basis of his Son’s eternal generation or eternal Father/Son relationship. The attribute of omnipotence belongs to all three Persons of the Trinity (Parker 2018:31).

Burk (2016) is a proponent of the eternal generation of the Son, a single divine will, and inseparable operations of the Trinity. Although he is positive about EFS, he avoids the term “subordination”.

3. A CRITICAL EVALUATION

When referring to the Trinity in this article, it seems best to distinguish between the ontological and the economic Trinity. These terms are often discussed in various ways and should rather be discussed separately. The reason why I want to approach the discussion in this manner lies in Ware’s statement that

the eternal equality of essence (ontological Trinity) and the eternal distinction of Persons (economic/functional Trinity) form the two pillars of Christianity.

As noted in the literature review, EFS does not deviate from the conventional Protestant movement with regard to the *ontological Trinity* – also called the “immanent Trinity” by Doyle and Horrell and the “inner-Trinitarian order” by Letham. In the ontological Trinity, there is a oneness of essence (οὐσία) in God. The Son and the Holy Spirit are not inferior in essence to the Father, as the three Persons of the Trinity indwell each other. Although the Father is the centre of rule, this asymmetric nature does not mean that the other two Persons are inferior in essence, because the Son and the Holy Spirit are not only *from* the Father, but also *part of (in)* the Father. Berkhof (1953:88-89) calls this the “metaphysical basis of the economic Trinity”.

Strong rightly claims that, to put the Father officially first, does not mean that he has superiority over the Son and the Holy Spirit, as it is an eternal institution (see Council of Chalcedon 451; Letham 2004:94-97). Letham (2004:400) summarises the ontological Trinity well, stating that

[t]his inner-Trinitarian order is distinguished by position and not status, by form and not being, by sequence and not power, for they are fully and perfectly equal.

However, to argue that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same being with no differences between them, would mean that Grudem (1994:433) is correct when he argues that we would then have to refer to them as Person A, Person A, and Person A.

EFS proponents often use two primary sources. In his *Summa Theologica* Article 1, Objection 4, Thomas Aquinas (2006) states that an inequality in the three Persons would mean that they do not have the same essence, therefore not being one God. In his *Institutes* Volume 1, Chapter 13, Calvin (2014:142) also refers to the undivided and simple essence of God. These two scholars argue for an “equality of essence among the persons of the Trinity”, which is, according to Parker (2018:25), affirmed by proponents of EFS. However, this is also affirmed by conventional Protestants and can thus not be classified as traces of EFS.

Whereas EFS does, in fact, agree with conventional Protestants about the economic Trinity, the main point of difference between these movements relates to the eternal Father-Son relationship, while not one of them really elaborates a great deal on the Holy Spirit. Horrell and Grudem point out that, although there is an ontological equality in the Trinity, the economic Trinity has different roles or functions. Berkhof indicates that the different works or roles of every Person befit that Person. Everything is ἐκ (out of) the Father, διὰ

(through) the Son, and ἐν (in) the Spirit. Ware, Grudem, and Hodge argue that the Father acts through the Son, while the Father and the Son act through the Holy Spirit. Berkhof assigns generation to the Father, filiation to the Son, and procession to the Holy Spirit. This is why Horrell and Ware argue that we must pray *to* the Father, *through* the Son, and *in* the power of the Spirit.

Based on these different roles, proponents such as Knight, Hodge, Strong, Berkhof, Doyle, Horrell, Ware, Grudem, Geisler, and Parker claim that the Father has *authority* over the Son, while they refer to the (functional) subordination of the Son to the Father. Chafer, Horrell, Parker, and Burk refer to the eternal generation of the Son, putting the Father in an authoritative position. Hodge, Horrell, Ware, and Letham use the term “*taxis*” (“functional order”) to refer to the relationship between the Father and the Son, mostly with the authority of the Father and the obedience of the Son inherent thereto. (Letham opposes this hierarchy.) The term “*taxis*”, which Letham (2004:480) also calls “orderliness” or “organisation”, would make sense when referring to each of the Persons who has a separate or specific function, although there are also shared works (see Parker 2018:31), but not with reference to authority – the one Person (and function) is not more important than the other.

Regarding authority, Doyle (2004) is persuasive when he refers to his relationship with his mother. He argues that he is permanently subject to her, and that this asymmetric nature has remained, even now that he is an adult. Regarding familial obedience, he regards himself as her inferior, but not as a human being. Although it sounds good, this cannot be true of the Son, as I believe there is no asymmetric quality between the Father and the Son, because these titles are only “anthropomorphic labels” that do not affect the equality within the Trinity (see Chafer 1993:316).

In line with the arguments of Kovach and Schemm (1999:464), Horrell (2007:63), and Ware (2007:159), there are traces of EFS in very early sources such as Athanasius of Alexandria (4th century), *Against the Heathen*, paragraphs 39-40 (Migne 1857:77-82):

[Against polytheism] For we must not think there is more than one ruler and maker of Creation: but it belongs to correct and true religion to believe that its *artificer* is one ... Who then might this *maker* be? ... the God we worship and preach is the only true One, Who is Lord of Creation and Maker of all existence. Who then is this, save the Father of Christ, most holy above all created existence, Who like an excellent pilot, by His own Wisdom and His own *Word*, our Lord and Saviour Christ, steers and preserves and orders all things, and does as seems to Him best? (Schaff 1885b:237, 238; emphasis added).

With this argument, “Athanasius fends off both polytheism (many gods – multiple sources of ultimate rule) and Arianism (degrees of divinity within a ‘trinity’)” (Doyle 2004). Athanasius touches specifically on the economic Trinity. The Father is depicted as the artificer/maker/excellent pilot who works through his Word – his Son, Jesus Christ – opening the door for an interpretation that the Father is superior to the Son. Doyle (2004) grabs this opportunity to observe a priority in Athanasius’ work where “the person and work of the Father” forms the definition of the Son, putting the Son in a somewhat inferior position (Doyle 2004). The economic Trinity depicts the roles and functions of both the Father and the Son as permanent and not interchangeable. Doyle could be correct with his argument, but the key question is: Was this what Athanasius meant with these words? Noting the theology of his time and his position in the church, the answer cannot be affirmative.

In my view, we cannot argue that the early church or the Church Fathers were, in fact, proponents of EFS. In order to evaluate their arguments, according to Butner (2019a), the following statement should be adhered to: If a concept or element is regarded as pro-Nicene, then it must be quoted by a large number of pro-Nicene proponents (theologians) and play a crucial role in their thought system (see also Butner 2018:30). In this instance, the emphasis is on “*larger ideas* rather than *isolated quotes*” (Butner 2019b). Scholars read the Church Fathers from *their own perspectives* (and not from the Church Fathers’), and in this way many Church Fathers are quoted out of context.

Ancient church and primary sources did not have any subordination in mind, although their words can sometimes be interpreted as such. The arguments of scholars such as Ware, stating that EFS was supported “from the beginning”, cannot be accepted (Ware 2007:159). However, we may argue that they already mentioned matters that pointed to EFS, without the intention to do so. During the time of the early church, EFS would most probably be regarded as a tributary of Arianism.

Does the (economic) Trinity ascribe authority to the Father, obedience to the Son, and procession to the Holy Spirit? In agreement with Augustine and (much later) Schaff,¹⁹ I argue that Jesus had a temporary functional/economic subordination to the Father, which ended after his incarnation (see also Council of Chalcedon 451;²⁰ Erickson 2009:18-19; Hausted 2017:11-12). John

19 In his doctrinal treatise, *On the Holy Trinity*, Book I, Chapter 7, Augustine declares that Jesus, while being incarnated, was less than the Father (see John 14:28), but not prior to and after that. During his incarnation, he was even “made less than Himself, who ‘emptied’ Himself, and took upon Him the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:6-7) (Schaff 1885a:35).

20 In *The letter of Pope Leo to Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, about Eutyches*, the Council (Council of Chalcedon [s.a.]) states: “For it is from us that he gets a humanity which is less than the Father; it is from the Father that he gets a divinity which is equal to the Father”.

5:19 and 6:38 refer to Jesus while he was incarnated. I argue against scholars such as Grudem (1994:251) who oppose this notion by contending that God is immutable, that the “change” of Jesus from being equal to the Father, to subordination (while being physically on earth), back to equal to the Father (after his incarnation) does not affect God’s immutability.

4. EFS – QUO VADIS?

When we mention or refer to God, we move to the terrain of interpretation and speculation. We interpret specific passages in the Bible from our point of reference, which is usually a subjective, dogmatically loaded point, and then we speculate about a given subject such as the Trinity. I want to illustrate this point with 1 Corinthians 15:24 and 28.²¹ These verses seemingly point to an eternal submission of the Son:

Then the end will come, **when he [the Son] hands over** the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power ... When everything is subjected to him [the Son], then **the Son himself will also be subjected to him** [the Father] who has subjected everything to him [the Son], so that God may be all in all (my own translation; emphasis added, WHO).²²

This translation seemingly implies a permanent submission of the Son. Is the assumption made earlier in this article correct that Jesus’ temporal subordination only concerns his incarnation. Does it extend to his second coming (Jansen 2009:550), or is it permanent?

According to Van Ruler (1947:90), there is a correspondence between the verb forms διατίθειμαι (*confer*) in Luke 22:29 and παραδίδω (*hand over*) in 1 Corinthians 15:24. In the first instance, the Father appoints/confers the Kingdom to the Son, making the Kingdom of God the Kingdom of Christ temporarily, while in the last instance, the Son hands back the Kingdom to the Father. Van Ruler (1963:65) views Christ as only a means and not an end in himself, as the Kingdom of God is the “great and radiant end of all things” (Jansen 2009:565). The ultimate and highest act of Jesus as Messiah is for him to cease to be the Messiah after his second coming (Van Ruler

21 Space does not permit a discussion about the primary sources, as did Schendel (1971), Lienhard (1983), and Koval (2019). Nor does it permit a full exegesis of these verses in this article. Jansen (2009:543) refers to this passage as a *crux interpretum*.

22 The verb form, παραδίδω (*hand over*) in verse 24 is elaborated on with a play on words in verse 28: ὅταν δὲ ὑποταγῆ (obedience, submission, subordination) αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα, τότε [καὶ] αὐτὸς ὁ υἱὸς ὑποταγήσεται (put in subjection, subject, subordinate) τῷ ὑποτάσσονται (put in subjection, subject, subordinate) αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα.

1947:107). Then Jesus' Kingdom "will give way to the final glory when God is 'all in all'" (Jansen 2009:566). The works of the Son (as Mediator and, in fact, as Messiah) and the Holy Spirit will come to an end and the Triune God will then be *all in all* (Van Ruler 1973:40).²³ Van Ruler (1947:149, 151) interprets "all in all" in light of Revelation 21:3a: "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them." Van Ruler (1947:151) argues that 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 "finds its fullest expression in his [Christ's] *willing subjection*" (emphasis added) (see also Rawulski 2013:127; Heil 2005:215). This is absolutely in line with EFS!

However, already in 1998, Fredrickson presented a "better understanding" of 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. Over against arguments that the term "all in all" in 1 Corinthians 15:28 refers to the restoration of God's sovereignty over everything, as well as the assimilation of the creation to God, Fredrickson (1998:260) argues that Paul's reference to subordination in the eschaton was, in fact, a reference to "personal identity and friendship" (Fredrickson 1998:255).²⁴ In this passage, subordination "designates both the personal relation of all things to Christ and the personal relation of the Son to God the Father" (Fredrickson 1998:256). Over against Van Ruler, who states that 1 Corinthians 15:28 refers to a return to the circumstances prior to Jesus' incarnation, Fredrickson argues that it refers to a "new reality".

Should the meaning of ὑποτάσσω in this passage be related to "sovereignty" or "obedience", the conclusion would be that Christ will be subordinated to God in a relation of "power over" (Fredrickson 1998:260). According to Fredrickson (1998:260), ὑποτάσσω could be better understood if it is translated with "to classify under". This implies that no command is taken, as this would rather be a participation into another reality that would establish the identity of the participator (Fredrickson 1998:260).

Fredrickson links three passages to this passage, in order to make his point. First, in 2 Corinthians 9:13, the noun ὑποταγή (as the King James translation translated it) refers to the "greater reality in which the church derives its identity" (Fredrickson 1998:261). The other two passages are Philippians 3:20-21 and Romans 8:18-21. Fredrickson (1998:261) argues that both these passages "share the theme of God's eschatological relation to creation" with 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, where the verb ὑποτάσσω refers to a "sense of identity through participation". He argues that there is a parallelism in Philippians 3:21 between "transformation of the human body to Christ's body"

23 According to Van Ruler (1973:40), this is also when Christ's incarnation will end.

24 Louw and Nida's (1988:468) *Greek-English Lexicon* does not support this translation, as they state that the Greek verb use, in this instance, for "will be made subject" – ὑποτάσσω or rather ὑποτάσσομαι – should be translated with "to obey", or "to submit to".

and the “subordination of all things to him”, where the verb form ὑποτάξει (*subordination*) should be interpreted in the same light as μετασχηματίσει (*transformation*). With Romans 8:18-21, Fredrickson (1998:262) claims that the two terms for “subjection” – ὑπετάγη and ὑποτάξαντα in verse 20 – do not refer to obedience, but rather to “gain identity from participation in something else”. With this interpretation, Fredrickson (1998:263) understands the following:

The Son’s eschatological subordination to the Father is to be understood in terms of the generation of his identity through his participation in the Father. When all things have been subordinated to Christ – that is, when all things receive their identity from their participation in the Son – then there will be no barriers for God to be in direct and personal relation with all of creation as the Father is directly related to the Son. In other words, God becoming all things to all is made possible by the participation of all things in Christ, whose identity is generated in his filial relation to the Father.

5. CONCLUSION

It is often necessary for a movement such as EFS to go against “the flow”, although the “flow” seems to be correct, just to question the reigning doctrine or “pillars” (Ware) of the church and cause some refinement if and where necessary. Therefore, EFS has its place and role to play in the current debate on the Trinity, especially in light of what Burk stated, namely that after a debate on the Trinity in 2016, the term EFS “has been substantially redefined” (Burk 2016:n.p.). Continuing debates are, therefore, imperative.

Further research is required to discuss the views of specific anti-EFS proponents such as, among others, Erickson, Giles, Sanders, and Bilezikian. Research should also be done on the *present role* of the Holy Spirit prior to the second coming of Jesus, who “proceeded” from the Father and the Son.

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Gehoorsaamheid van die Seun